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ABSTRACT

Testing the hypothesis that socioeconomic status (SES) is related to altruistic behavior, 466 respondents derived from 4,799 households in rural Western Colorado (Woodland Park, Gunnison City, and Durango) were contacted to determine the degree of voluntary basement sharing that might be expected in the event of a nuclear crisis. Respondents were divided into 4 groups; wherein, groups 1 and 2 (2,117 and 1,378 respondents) were contacted via minimum and extended mail only, the interview group was contacted by interview and mail (N=241), and the control group (N=543) by mail only. A mass media program preceded the personal contacts and employed social-psychological techniques. The SES variables employed were occupation, educational attainment, and age. Results indicated: occupation, educational attainment, and age were all significantly associated with altruistic behavior as measured by willingness to share; occupation was not related to sharing under any situation where age and education were controlled; age was related to altruism when there was a combination of high or low education and occupation; education was related to sharing with high occupation and middle age or with low occupation and other age. Study limitations were a sample including only basement owners and the possibility of nonrelated and/or limited SES variables. (JC)

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SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND ALTRUISTIC BEHAVIOR AMONG RESIDENTS OF WESTERN COLORADO

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SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND ALTRUISTIC BEHAVIOR AMONG RESIDENTS OF WESTERN COLORADO

The purpose of this paper is to report the results of a study dealing with socioeconomic status and altruistic behavior. More specifically, the paper describes a first step in testing the hypothesis that people in lower socioeconomic status levels tend to be less altruistic than those in higher levels.

Introduction

During the late 1930's and into the 40's and 50's, considerable research was devoted to the "discovery" of social class. Many well-known research standards were produced at the time by Carl Withers,[1] John Dollard,[2] Lloyd Warner,[3] August Hollingshead,[4] and others. Their efforts dealt primarily with the measurement of social class and its behavioral concommitants.

Then, during the 1960's a major shift in focus took place. While notable exceptions exist, most research efforts in this speciality area got caught up with the "War on Poverty." While billed as "preventative" in nature, most research and writing during those years were not. Rather, they were directed toward providing the empirical underpining for ameliorative programs, most of which have proven to be only marginally successful at best. Despite some obvious advantages of these programs, there have been many other disadvantages. First, the kinds of programs begun during the poverty

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*This research was part of a larger project sponsored by the Defense Civil Preparedness Agency, Washington, D.C.

war are growing to the extent that there is little chance of other programs (even those showing promise of being more effective) being initiated owing to both costs and public disenchantment. Second, many social scientists have succumbed to the Siren's call of advocacy, feeling that the ends justified the means. As a result, some have lost considerable credibility for themselves and others through applications of insufficient and unreliable knowledge designed to promote total equality[5] rather than meet specific needs.[6] Third, as social scientists have increasingly become social engineers and even social reformers in increasing numbers, attempts to find root causes of problems have been neglected, and those who have attempted to deal with them have often been given various uncomplimentary labels. Nevertheless, it appears appropriate to attempt to deal with the root causes and consequences of poverty, and even low SES, without feeling obliged to attribute total responsibility for this condition to others. This is the approach used in the study.

Theoretical Orientation

From a number of theoretical perspectives, altruistic behavior would not be expected to occur among those in relatively low SES levels as much as among those in higher levels. At least this is so, so far as the existence of and assumptions underlying, the "social responsibility norm" and the "norm of reciprocity" are recognized and accepted. These norms have been theorized as accounting for a considerable amount of helping behavior.

According to the social responsibility norm, people act to help others, not for material gain or social approval primarily, but simply to do what

is right. Helping actions motivated by this norm would be directed toward all people in need, irregardless of their characteristics or behavior.

The norm of reciprocity moves a step away from the idealism of the social responsibility norm and toward social exchange theory. Basically, it holds that persons should treat others as they have been treated. Therefore, if a person had been helped by others when he was in need, he would feel obliged to help others in need. On the other hand, if his needs had been ignored, he would feel comfortable in ignoring similar needs of others.

One of the assumptions of both the social responsibility and reciprocity norms is that they are learned, as is the altruistic behavior they are posited as fostering. Hence, possibilities exist that varied socio-cultural differences modify the extent of altruism. As a result of the foregoing, it is hypothesized that those in comparatively low socioeconomic status levels are less altruistic than those in higher levels.

The hypothesis that socioeconomic status is related to altruism is based on a number of empirical conclusions. First, as has been described by many researchers, religious activity among members of lower-classes is generally less than that of upper-class members.[8] Religious activity in the United States generally involves being socialized into accepting a Judeo-Christian ethic which nurtures both the social responsibility and reciprocity norms.

Second, as Hodges has indicated, lower class persons are characterized by certain modes of behavior which operate against altruism. For example, they are generalized as being ". . . hostile and suspicious toward strangers;

they see the world as a dog-eat-dog jungle."[9] Moreover, Hodges mentions another well-documented phenomena bearing on altruism. It is that lower class children drop out of school earlier than those of upper classes. Inasmuch as schools tend to be imbued with middle-class values which espouse both social responsibility and reciprocity norms, lower-class children tend to be socialized less with these norms in school less than are others.

Coser has written, moreover, that the poor becomes "infantilized" through the treatment given them in efforts to assist them.[10] In other words, programs designed to help the poor tend to make them more dependent and, we might assume, less likely to take the independent stance required to be altruistic.

Finally, inasmuch as observing helping models increases motivation to in turn help others, altruistic behavior is circular.[11] Those in relatively low socioeconomic strata would not be expected to be as altruistic as others because, if the theoretical postulates given above are correct, they would not see altruism as much, and hence be deprived of models to follow.

With these theoretical notions in mind, some first steps were undertaken to determine whether, in fact, lower-class status does tend to be antithetical to altruistic behavior.

Methodology

These steps were taken as part of an applied research effort recently completed in Western Colorado. This effort was directed toward eliciting participation in a civil defense program involving the use and sharing of

residential basements as shelters in the event of a nuclear emergency. The specific goal of the program which is of concern here is the effort undertaken to obtain commitments by residents of western Colorado to share their basements with people who might be relocated from Colorado Springs in a nuclear crisis. To do this, a field-test was undertaken in western Colorado which maximized voluntary participation as part of the social responsibility norm.

Locale

The site of the field-test was in the area designated as the reception area for evacuees from Colordo Springs, Colorado, in the event of a nuclear emergency. Three small Colorado cities (Woodland Park, Gunnison City, and Durango) were included in the field-test as well as Gunnison County.

Sample

Attempts were made to contact all households in the locale selected for the field-test. A total of 4,799 households were actually contacted during the field-test which was about 85 percent of those in the area.[12] Only the 466 of these who had home basements found to be completely "suitable" for shelters were dealt with in the present study.

Except for Gunnison City, the names and adresses of households were obtained from public utilities. In Gunnison City, utility listings were not made available, and a less up-to-date list was obtained from city officials.

Contacts

Three different means of contacting residents were used. These differed

in the intensity of personal contact employed. Respondents were divided into groups based on the kind of contact used. Group 1 respondents were given minimal contact by mail only. Group 2 respondents, like those in Group 1, were contacted by mail only, but there was more mail exchange. The Interview Group was contacted by mail as with Group 2, and by personal interviews. The Control Group was contacted by mail only. A total of 2,117; 1,878; 241; and 543 were in Group 1, Group 2, Interview Group, and Control Group, respectively. In devising the varied means of contacting residents, and in the mass media program which preceded personal contacts, pertinent social-psychological propositions regarding motivation were employed in hopes of maximizing voluntary participation.

Social-Psychological Concepts Employed

Although these social-psychological concepts were employed in an attempt to persuade respondents to participate in the relocation program, the voluntary participation was the goal.

Studies have determined that, among other characteristics, the credibility, attractiveness, and group affiliations of the communicator, as perceived by the audience, are some of the most important in determining the communicator's effectiveness.[13] Accordingly, all communications (even though constructed and distributed by staff personnel) came to the audience over the signatures of local civil authorities, including DCPA officials, elected city fathers, and county commissioners. Also, any potential boomerang effective (as a results of the investigators being viewed as "outsiders") was effectively eliminated.

Such people, by virtue of their elected positions were opinion leaders and as such, legitimized not only the message but also the entire project as it concerned their locale. Diffusion studies indicate that legitimization by opinion leaders is, perhaps, the most crucial of all the variables involved in the acceptance of a new idea, procedure, or product.[14]

Social reinforcement of altruistic behavior has been found to increase the tendency of subjects to be altruistic.[15] In the pre-test, social reinforcement was provided in many ways. These included having letters to households signed by local political and civil defense officials, providing total mass media coverage which emphasized the vital and voluntary role of housholds in providing shared space, and personal letters of appreciation being sent.

Empathy has been found to reinforce altruism.[16] If distress is seen in another person, attempts are often made to reduce that distress because of the distress felt in seeing it in others.

Modeling or the use of significant examples was used in the field-test as part of a "band-wagon" technique. Respondents were acquainted with the fact that large segments of populations in Colorado Springs had agreed during the previous year to share their basements during nuclear emergencies.

The social responsibility norm was emphasized by pointing out that life or death situations were involved, and that no remuneration could be expected--other than the satisfaction which comes from saving lives.[17]

The reciprocity norm may have been vitalized in the field-test by providing potential sharers with information. Respondents received information

from local political and civil defense officials about nuclear threats and means of overcoming them. It is possible that they felt obligated to reciprocate with positive responses to sharing requests because of being sent this possibly vital information.

Cost analysis thinking was induced by suggestions that helping others in a sharing relationship would contribute to saving not only sharees' lives, but the lives of sharers through pooling of manpower, knowledge, and survival skills and supplies.

Bystander effect, or the tendency of the presence of others to inhibit altruistic action, was countered in the field-test in two ways. The first way involved rejection of the notion to approach potential sharers through groups such as the P.T.A., schools, and churches, but to approach them individually or as members of families with personally addressed letters. Thus, knowledge of any lack of response by others and ambiguity in the message content was reduced.[18] Moreover, people were given precise instructions about how they could help, thus increasing the likelihood that they would take the desired action.[19]

Socioeconomic Status

Three separate variables were used to measure socioeconomic status. These were: occupation, educational attainment, and age. Contingency tables were prepared showing the relationship between these data and commitments to share with relocated persons both singly, and as part of a simple partial association analysis.

Results

As mentioned, a total of 466 households whose basements were entirely suitable for sharing were contacted using the methods described above. All these respondents were asked to commit themselves to sharing with families from Colorado Springs during nuclear emergencies. Given below are the results of their responses according to occupation, education, and age. Also shown below are the results of partial association tests designed to determine if these variables influence functions independently of each other.

Total Association

Occupation--Total Association. --As shown in Table 1, a statistically significant association was found to exist between occupation and commitment to share with relocated persons. Those most willing to share were persons whose occupations were categorized as: professionals, sales, and proprietors or managers. Those least willing to share were classified as: blue-collar or laborer, and retired or disabled. There does appear to be a tendency for those in lower socioeconomic strata to be less altruistic and willing to share with relocated persons. However, the amount of differences observed among these occupational categories and willingness to share as measured by an asymmetric Lambda with sharing dependent was "low" (Lambda = .074).

Educational Attainment--Total Association. --As indicated in Table 2, a statistically significant association was found to exist between educational attainment and commitment to share with relocated households. Persons who had completed a relatively high number of school years tended to be those most willing to share. On the other hand, respondents with the fewest

Table 1.--Association Between Respondents' Occupation and Willingness to Share Their Home Basements with Relocated Persons During a Nuclear Emergency (N = 428*)

Occupation	Willingness to Share Basement		
	Yes	No	Number of Cases
Professional	69.6%	30.4%	79
Sales	66.7%	33.3%	21
Proprietor or Manager	62.1%	37.9%	58
White-collar	62.1%	37.9%	29
Blue-collar or Laborer	50.9%	49.1%	110
Retired or Disabled	44.1%	55.9%	118
Other	61.5%	38.5%	13

*Number of missing observations = 38

Chi-square = 16.34; d.f. = 6; p = .01

Lambda (asymmetric with share dependent) = .074

Table 2.--Association Between Respondents' Educational Attainment and Willingness to Share Their Home Basements with Relocated Persons During a Nuclear Emergency (N = 414*)

Years of School Completed	Willingness to Share Basement		
	Yes	No	Number of Cases
17 or more	71.6%	28.4%	88
16	57.6%	42.4%	59
13 - 15	65.2%	34.8%	66
12	49.2%	50.8%	126
9 - 11	50.0%	50.0%	28
8 and under	31.9%	68.1%	47

*Number of missing observations = 52

Chi-square = 24.79; d.f. = 5; p = <.001

Lambda (asymmetric with share dependent) = .104

years of school completed tended to be those who did not plan to share their basements. The amount of association between these two variables was again "low", however, as measured by an asymmetric Lambda (.104).

Age--Total Association. --Another statistically significant association was found relative to age of respondents and willingness to share (Table 3). Respondents who were 30 to 60 were comparatively willing to commit themselves to share their homes. On the other hand, those under 30 years of age and those 60 or more years of age were relatively unwilling to commit themselves to share. The amount of association between these two variables was about the same as observed in the previous two tables (asymmetric Lambda = .141).

Partial Association

Tests of significance were made using partial association methods to further refine the observed relationship between age, educational attainment, and occupation. These tests were made for each of the three independent variables relative to the dependent variable while statistically controlling for the influence of the other two.

Occupation--Partial Association. --Contrary to expectations, none of the four partial tests revealed statistically significant to be present between occupation and willingness to share when controls were exerted as shown in Table 4.

Age--Partial Association. --Two of the four partial association tests using age as the independent variable, and willingness to share their homes' basements were found to be significantly associated (Table 5). One significant

Table 3.--Association Between Respondents' Ages and Willingness to Share their Home Basements with Relocated Persons During a Nuclear Emergency (N = 419*)

Age	Willingness to Share Basement		
	Yes	No	Number of Cases
80 years or more	7.7%	92.3%	13
70 - 79 years	41.9%	58.1%	43
60 - 69 years	46.7%	53.3%	92
50 - 59 years	60.5%	39.5%	76
40 - 49 years	70.4%	29.6%	81
30 - 39 years	69.4%	30.6%	72
29 years or less	47.6%	52.4%	42

*Number of missing observations = 47

Chi-square = 32.92; d.f. = 6; p =<.001

Lambda (asymmetric with share dependent) = .141

Table 4.--Design and Results of Partial Association Tests Between Occupation and Basement Sharing with Age and Education Controlled

Variables Used and Test Results				
Control		Independent	Dependent	Test results*
Middle age	High education	Occupation	Sharing	p=.52; N=125
	Low education	Occupation	Sharing	p=.83; N=103
Other (low, high) age	High education	Occupation	Sharing	p=.82; N= 86
	Low education	Occupation	Sharing	p=.28; N= 96

*Tests made with chi-square; d.f. = 1

Table 5.--Design and Results of Partial Association Tests Between Age and Basement Sharing with Education and Occupation Controlled

Variables Used and Test Results				
Control		Independent	Dependent	Test results*
High education	High occupation	Age	Sharing	$p=<.01;N=134$
	Low occupation	Age	Sharing	$p= .31;N= 77$
Low education	High occupation	Age	Sharing	$p= .82;N= 49$
	Low occupation	Age	Sharing	$p=<.01;N=150$

*Tests made with chi-square; d.f. = 1

association occurred under conditions of "high" occupational status and "high" educational attainment.* Those in the "middle" age category (30-59) were more inclined to share than those older or younger. The amount of the association was slight, however (Lambda asymmetric = .05).

The other significant association was observed among those with "low" occupational status and "low" educational attainment.** Here again, those in "middle" age were more inclined to share than others. The amount of the association was "low" (Lambda asymmetric = .14).

Education--Partial Association. --As was the situation with the partial association analysis relative to age, only two of the four tables regarding education were significantly associated with sharing (Table 6). The first occurred under "high" occupational status and with "middle" aged respondents. Those persons with "high" years of school completed were more apt to share than others. However, the amount of association was negligible.

Among respondents whose occupations were categorized as "low," and who were either below 30 years of age or above 60, there was a statistically significant association between educational attainment and sharing. Those "high" in educational attainment were again the most willing to share. The amount of this association was very low (Lambda asymmetric = .04).

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*Categorized into the "high occupational status were: Professionals, proprietors and managers, sales-oriented, and white-collar workers. Those in the "high" educational category had completed at least one year of schooling beyond high school.

**Categorized as having "low" occupational status were: laborers, blue-collar workers, and retired or disabled persons.

Table 6.--Design and Results of Partial Association Tests Between Educational Attainment and Basement Sharing with Occupation and Age Controlled

Variables Used and Test Results				
Control		Independent	Dependent	Test results*
High occupation	Middle age	Education	Sharing	p=<.001;N=144
	Other age	Education	Sharing	p= .92; N= 39
Low occupation	Middle age	Education	Sharing	p= .53; N= 84
	Low age	Education	Sharing	p=<.05; N=143

*Tests made with chi-square; d.f. = 1

Discussion

The findings reported in this paper only partly support the hypothesis that socioeconomic status is related to altruistic behavior. Data obtained from 466 households in Colorado show that occupation, educational attainment, and age are all significantly associated with altruistic behavior as measured by willingness to share their home basements with relocated persons in nulcear emergencies. However, when partial association procedures were used which tested each of the three independent variables with basement sharing while controlling the other two, their generality was shown to be limited. Thus, occupation was not related to commitment to share under any situation in which age and education were controlled. Age, on the other hand, was related to altruism under two conditions--with high education and high occupation, and low education and low occupation. Likewise, education was related to sharing under two conditions--with high occupation and middle age, and low occupation and "other" (under 30, over 60) age. These findings suggest that occupation status generally may not be related to altruism contrary to theoretical statements. However, educational attainment and age do seem to be somewhat related. In so far as education and age reflect SES, there may still be reason to think that an association exists between SES and altruism (or lack of it). Without occupation being related, however, the amount of relationship seems to be practically, if not statistically unimportant.

Limitations

A number of limitations make these conclusions highly tentative. Three of the most important are: first, the selection of only those families with

basements suitable for shelters may have resulted in a sample which did not include those in the lowest socioeconomic strata; hence, a homogeneous group may have been used. Second, the single measures of socioeconomic status may not have been interrelated and reflective of socioeconomic status. Third, these variables were limited in number. Despite the fact that occupation was used, and is generally considered to be the best single measure of SES, its reliability in measuring SES must be questioned when used alone.

FOOTNOTES

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